

Celebrating Animals

It's a common scene at the SPCA Wildlife Care Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: a baby squirrel drinking an electrolyte solution from a rubber dropper. Of the 14,000 animals admitted annually, more than 1,700 last year were infants like this one in immediate need of TLC.

The largest U.S. facility of its kind—and soon to be the latest addition to the HSUS family after a corporate combination is completed this year—the center has cared for sick, injured, and orphaned wild creatures since 1969. Last year, more than 250 were baby squirrels, one of whom was still in the nursery in December. “He was a late bloomer—I’m surprised we got him,” says nursery supervisor Jessica Sayre. “Almost every case is a mystery, but our guess is the mother was confused about the time of season and had him late. He came in with minor injuries and had a problem with his teeth, so the mother may have rejected him from the nest. But he’s doing great now. We’re just waiting for his top teeth to come in.”

To rehydrate the malnourished squirrel and prepare his system for a more complex food formula, staffers initially fed their postseason straggler Pedialyte by hand. A week later, he began eating solid foods to get ready for a mid-December release.

Helping wild creatures in distress would not be possible without rescue assistance from caring members of the public. But the rehabilitation of patients this small should be left to trained professionals with access to lifesaving equipment, says Sayre. At the Florida facility, for example, an incubation system that simulates a mother opossum’s warm, moist pouch contributed to an 82 percent survival rate for baby opossums in 2008.

As vital as this care is for some animals, transport to a rehab center is not always necessary; some young animals may seem orphaned but are actually just earning their wings, says Sayre. “A lot of people don’t realize that birds learn to fly from the ground up,” she says. “If they’re hopping around, and they’re feathered enough so you don’t see any skin, then they’re probably fledging. If they’re not feathered enough, they could be cold and not know what to do. You can make a nest out of a berry basket, put the bird inside, and place the nest on the closest branch—if it’s fledging, it will hop right back out. Observe from a distance to make sure the parents are caring for the nestling.”

—Andy MacAlpine

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